

THE RELUCTANT WRITER



THE PERILS OF PASTE

Oh, the temptation to cut and paste! When you're pressed for time; when you can't think of an idea; when you know you've already written something similar, and it's definitely just sitting in a file somewhere.

When we feel the urge to cut and paste from an earlier document, often it's because of lapsed confidence. "I used to know what I was talking about, and now I don't. Maybe I should go back and rely on my earlier, more competent self." There are definitely some circumstances where this strategy will work. Usually, it'll be early in the writing process, when you're trying to get back in touch with your writing voice, or when you need a jump-start to launch an argument.

But a lot of the time, the impulse to cut and paste is a trap. If you're turning to an earlier document because the current one has lost focus, patching in a piece that was generated a while ago isn't likely to flow well with the existing material. And then you'll have even more gaps and tangents to take care of. This is never the time-saving move that you hoped it would be.

A similar problem arises when you try to conserve energy by "quoting yourself," re-using old text to avoid writing the same stuff over again. By the time you dig up the original file and try to square it with the new document, though, you'll usually find that you've lost half your work time, you don't like the old text anymore, and it only partially fills the gap anyway.

I wouldn't say that cutting and pasting is never recommended. Just be aware of the fragmentation it can cause. The older the source material is, and the further along you are in the drafting process, the more risky the proposition. If a voice in your head says, "Just cut and paste!", remind yourself that this can be a symptom of avoidance.

A better idea might be to summarize the idea you're trying to convey verbally, off the top of your head. Once this has gotten you started, you can usually write a new section from scratch more quickly and with better integration than if you had pasted. Your thinking benefits from having written all those previous versions after all.

CONSULTING

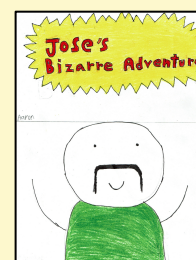
Now is the time to get on the Fall calendar! Requests for after-school time slots are filled in the order they are received.

KIDS: During the school year, I work with students on **school assignments, application essays, and creative projects** that are designed to boost writing skills. I also offer **learning profile assessments** to identify where writing challenges are coming from, and give you written recommendations to share with parents, teachers, and service providers.

ADULTS: Weekly consultation and editorial feedback can be helpful if you're stalled out on an old writing project, or would like to get motivated for a new one: **dissertations, book manuscripts, reports, website copy**, etc.

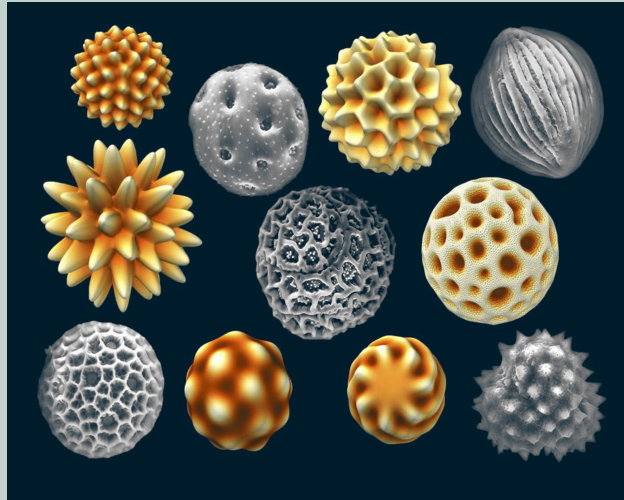
*Sessions take place at my Temescal office:
510 49th St. (@Telegraph), #209
Oakland, CA 94609*

COMICS PROJECTS



Thanks to a successful trial run of comics workshops over the summer, I will now be offering them to individuals and small groups during the school year! The comics sessions are great for kids who learn better through humor and with visual models. We practice strategies for coming up with ideas, following through on a narrative arc, planning and pacing writing work, and adding support and emphasis where it's needed. Contact me for details and scheduling information!

PATTERNS & MAPS



A lot of the problems people have with writing are exacerbated by the internet. At the most basic level, it's a constant distraction, and it preys on our brains' instinct to avoid unpleasant emotions. Writing almost always requires us to grapple with complexity and insecurity, so we quickly grow accustomed to switching from a writing task to the momentary relief of surfing the internet or looking at email. Eventually this habit carves a deep neural pathway, and we just default to it. It can be very hard to unlearn.

On a less obvious note, I think that we're unconsciously changing the way we process information when we get it online. The internet is a huge depository of unrelated and unsynthesized information, without much organic structure to give it meaning. Information is not grouped together by theme, quality, origin, or date. Before we started using the internet to answer our questions, we relied a lot more on contextual clues: for example, if you wondered what year *Citizen Kane* was made, you'd think, "Well, it had to be after William Randolph Hearst had established his newspaper empire, but probably before the 1950's when color film was more common." You had to think about why your question was meaningful, and link what you didn't know to your fund of existing contextual knowledge. The more you did this, the larger your network of contextual information grew, and your educated guesses became more and more functional. Nowadays, we hardly ever guess, though, because Google can tell us the correct answer right away. Unfortunately, just learning that the answer is "1941" hardly engages us in the history and meaning of the film the way the other method did.

When we lose the ability to work in context, and just obtain isolated facts, we lose track of all kinds of other valuable information. How do we know this is true? Why is it important? It's no wonder that it's harder to come up an original idea, when we aren't thinking in terms of questions, only answers. It's no wonder that we can't develop a thesis, when we aren't looking for patterns that connect pieces of information. And it's no wonder that we have a hard time creating an outline, when we don't have an organic map of the way ideas are linked together.

We're not likely to stop using the internet any time soon, but we can be more aware of the fact that its data lacks context. We still need to exercise our ability to interpret it, by looking for patterns of information and making maps of the way ideas are connected and prioritized. Use scratch paper and conversation to draw out these key steps in your thought process. And the next time you reach for your phone to answer a question, see if you can stop yourself, and make an educated guess instead.